

THE ROSSTON ROAD MYSTERY

• BY HELEN TOMPKINS •

Annerly Draws Line Like Hangman's Noose Opposite Name In Secret List.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Annerly, a detective, has been called by Major Fairfax, of The Orchards, to make some investigations. Arriving at the station, he is met by Antrim, the major's secretary, who tells him that Fairfax died suddenly that morning. You'll play is suspected.

The family at The Orchards consists of Major Fairfax's sister-in-law, Walter, and Rosamond Foster, and Laura and Jeanne Fairfax, all orphans, children of the major's own brother and sister. There are also servants, a housekeeper (Mrs. Edmunds), and Jefferson, the major's body-servant. Reynolds, a lawyer of uncertain reputation, conducts the inquest. Mr. Dalton is of the opinion that the major was poisoned. Mrs. Fairfax is certain that the death was caused by one of the household, especially the beneficiary of the major's will, which Adolph Myers, the family lawyer, has charge of. At the inquest Myers discovers that he has brought away from his office the wrong papers, and the will is not read. After the inquest, Annerly and Myers start to drive to town. The lawyer speaks of the mutual hatred of Mrs. Fairfax and the housekeeper, and declares that there has been a cruel wrong in the entire proceeding. On the bank of a river the horse shies and they are precipitated into the stream. Myers is killed and Annerly barely escapes with his life.

Jean Fairfax, meeting Annerly, tells him of a secret visitor she says Major Fairfax received at his front door the last evening. He was alive, and who told him of some mysterious woman whom he had found for Fairfax at Quivering Bayou. Miss Fairfax had been an accidental eavesdropper. She was quite certain she knew the visitor's voice. Annerly goes to Quivering Bayou, where she finds a man and woman with an imbecile child. News of the death of Fairfax throws the woman into convulsions. He enters their hut to get some medicine. Jean tells Annerly that on the night before her uncle's death he talked with a man on the veranda who made him a present of a small parcel. The man's voice was familiar. She heard him mention finding something at Quivering Bayou. Annerly goes to the bayou on the next day, and comes upon an elderly couple living there in an old cabin. Then hearing of the major's death, the man seizes Annerly's horse and sets off to find Myers, being ignorant of his death. On the way back Annerly stumbles upon Walter Foster and a girl, Statia, with whom he is in love. She lives with the old couple, but is obviously of a different sort. Foster takes Annerly home.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

"I will have to say it, I dare say, to help you understand the situation. Rosy and Laura were never on the best of terms even from the beginning. My sister was jealous of her cousin's influence over her uncle, and Laura has a nasty disposition."

"And after the will things grew worse. Laura persisted in taunting my sister as if she already knew that she was my uncle's heir. And to make matters worse, Rosy, I am sure, had more than half a liking for Antrim, and it infuriated her that he persisted in showing his preference for Laura so openly."

"I do not mean that my sister was in love with him," he added hastily. "I am quite sure that she never was that, but she was young and handsome and she resented the fact that Laura, little younger and no handsomer than herself, should parade her knowledge of his infatuation so openly."

"I understand the situation now," said Annerly.

"As I have said, after the will was made things of course went from bad to worse. Laura pretended to know—"

He stared at the names a long time as if enlightenment must come in some way from the senseless characters upon the bit of paper. Then he walked to the window and looked outside.

The sun had set behind the tender growth of budding forest—a rosy stain that swept across the wide horizon and melted in the upward sweep of cradling pink of apple buds and blossoms faded a little as the shadows fell into a drift of white. Spring was quickening a thousand stems into color and fragrance.

He had forgotten the paper in his hand and the problem to which he could not find an answer. And then suddenly upon the driveway he saw some men coming toward the house carrying an empty coffin between them. The shadow of it, black and ominous, fell across the threshold.

Annerly shivered a little as he heard the measured tread of the bearers in the hall outside. His eyes grew stern and his lips smileless. He took the paper from his pocket again, and opposite one of the names he had so lately written he drew a straight black line that dropped at the end like a hangman's loop.

The body of Adolph Myers, pending its removal to his brother's home in the city, from which the funeral was to take place, rested in the back parlor, a room little frequented at any time by the family, and separated from the apartment where the shrouded body of a Major Fairfax lay in solemn state by a fast-closed door.

When Annerly entered, it was cool, and empty save for the dead body. The windows, left open slightly, were on the north side of the house, and through the half-drawn curtains the detective caught a tantalizing glimpse of the shadowy forest.

An old pear tree, gnarled and crooked, held withered arms across the low sill as if to greet the sudden burden which death had brought. The den which death had brought. The wind brought fragrant harvests of pale, shell-like, pink petals and laid them about the black coffin resting on its low trestles.

"May you not have been mistaken, Foster?" asked Annerly quietly. "May not Laura Fairfax have really known?"

"I am quite sure that she did not, sir. My uncle liked to see the strife between the two. I have sometimes doubted if, after all, he cared any more for Laura than for my sister. And I have more than once thought that Jean, with her quiet, mouse-like ways, was more to him than the others. Only it would have spoiled the sport for him had Jean been the fortunate one, and known it."

"Antrim—"

"Knew quite as little as the others,

I am sure. Nor was Jefferson any wiser. No, Mr. Annerly, my uncle and the lawyer were the only ones who knew anything about the provisions of that will, and they are both dead."

"I have seen the will itself, Walter," said the detective, "and Laura was right. She is the legatee."

The boy looked at him stupidly. "I don't believe it, sir," he said but it seems incredible."

"Why?"

"I don't know!" The lad looked at him helplessly. "But if Laura is the legatee, Mr. Annerly, there has been crooked work somewhere and you may depend upon it."

"Your words"—the detective changed the subject evasively—"would indicate that some one in the house had authority enough even over Jefferson, devoted as he was to his master's interests, to set Major Fairfax's wishes aside with impunity. If this was not Laura—"

"It certainly was not Laura, sir."

"Then who was it?"

"I can only repeat, sir, that I had not the slightest idea then and I have not the slightest idea now."

"I did not question you as closely as the others yesterday, Foster," said the detective, veering from the subject matter again. "You—some one told me that your uncle sent you into town that night, the night before the murder, on business. What was that business?"

Young Foster hesitated perceptibly. "My uncle had seemed vaguely troubled for some weeks," he said at length. "I knew this, although none of the others seemed to have noticed it. He was ill at ease and unlike himself. And he was prosecuting some sort of inquiry—"

Annerly faced him squarely.

"What do you mean by that, Foster?" he said deliberately.

The lad twisted uneasily in his seat. "That is exactly what I cannot do," he said with some thing like a return of his old sullenness. "I only know that he wrote and posted letters that Antrim never saw; that he received and sent messages—"

"To whom, and from whom?"

"To an address in town. Of course, I do not know whom the messages were from. I can only surmise—"

"Surmise what?"

"That they were all from the same person, sir. I know more than that. I know that twice, at least, he received visits after the rest of the household was asleep—visits that even Antrim, clever as he thinks himself—"

Annerly checked him.

"I have reason to think that some one saw your uncle—talked with him—that night at the front door after Jefferson had left him apparently preparing for bed," he said suddenly. "Have you any knowledge of this, Foster?"

"Yes, sir. I saw the man."

Annerly, with some difficulty, repressed a startled exclamation.

"You saw him?" he said quickly. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"Because I could not think that it had any bearing on the matter, sir. Mr. Antrim was the man."

CHAPTER VIII.

Unexpected Developments.

Annerly did not speak for a moment. He lighted a cigar and looked away from the young man at his side to the stretch of freshly plowed fields on his right.

"Tell me about that night, Walter," he said at last. "I think—na matter why—that you are mistaken about seeing Antrim."

"My uncle told me just before night-fall that he wanted me to ride into Rosston after supper and see if there was a telegram for him."

"The roads were good, and I did not mind the trip in the least, as perhaps he knew. I thought that he seemed a little excited. Wait until 10 o'clock on the chance that there may be one late, Walter," he said.

"There was no message, and I did wait until after 10. When I did start home, though, I went at a gallop. It was 11 o'clock by my watch when I left my horse at the stable and started to the house."

"I was in the shadow of the house and walking on the grass to keep from disturbing Aunt Helen. Her room was near the front of the building and she always made a great to-do about her wakefulness, although I never had any faith in it, when quite suddenly I saw that some one was standing at the front door, and heard my uncle talking to him. I don't know what they were saying."

"I saw the man hand my uncle a package, and the sight reminded me of the fact that I had brought out of a bundle of newspapers from town and that I had left them fastened to the saddle. I went back to the stable after it, and the man was gone and the front door closed when I got back."

"And you thought that the man was Antrim?" Annerly asked. "Why should you think so, Foster?"

Walter Foster looked at him a little startled. "I don't know," he confessed. "He was about the size and general appearance of Antrim, for one thing. We haven't many visitors at the 'Orchards.' Mr. Annerly—scarcely any who come in the evening. And I have told you, you know, that it was almost or quite even o'clock. I just knew that it was Antrim, sir. I added earnestly."

"I will have to think it over, Walter," said the detective abstractedly. "I wish that you wouldn't mention what I said to you about seeing the will, please."



HE SAW SOME MEN COMING TOWARD THE HOUSE CARRYING AN EMPTY COFFIN BETWEEN THEM.

"I would not dream of telling anybody—not even Rosamond," said the boy, and so the conversation ended.

"No news of the will?" asked Annerly of Mrs. Fairfax a little later.

"No—not a word. I thought perhaps that you had gone to town yourself."

She looked at him inquisitively. "No. I may go tomorrow, possibly. It is a relief to have the doctor out of the house," she said with a sigh. "I am not heartless, Mr. Annerly, but indeed the occurrences of the last few days have tried me sorely. I was sorry to see that Walter had so little regard for the amenities as to be absent from home when his uncle was laid to rest. It is certain to cause the whole family to be misjudged and unkindly criticized."

"Walter is young, Mrs. Fairfax," said the detective coolly.

She flushed. "You speak plainly," she said. "I am accustomed to doing so."

She twisted her handkerchief between her fingers a little nervously. A spot of color glowed on either cheek.

"Mr. Annerly, Mr. Antrim is leaving tomorrow. Of course, under the circumstances his usefulness here is at an end, but I had not considered the possibility of his leaving so soon, and I am so afraid that Laura will do something rash that will make us the laughing-stock of the county. The child is madly infatuated with him, and after all, what do we know of the man—his antecedents, his past, his prospects? Absolutely nothing."

Annerly had caught only a portion of what I said to you about seeing the will, please."

"Going tomorrow!" he said hastily. "My dear fellow," urged Annerly,

"It seems to me that you are abnormally sensitive. In the first place, Mrs. Fairfax is only here on suzerainty and as a chaperon for the young people. If any one has a paramount claim here Laura, as the reputed heiress—"

"I know all that," said Antrim testily. "Really, Mr. Annerly, I would rather not discuss Laura's prospects with anyone; least of all with you. Mrs. Fairfax has seen fit to insult me, and her unjust insinuations have about driven me wild. One would think that in common decency—"

He stopped short and colored a little.

"I beg your pardon," he said roughly. "I have the very devil of a temper when I am aroused, Mr. Annerly, as no doubt you can see. A letter will reach me at any time, and I will leave you a card with my address."

"I think that you had better talk to me a little while before that, Antrim," said Annerly quietly. "Of course, you are far too clever to have been deceived by the verdict of the coroner's jury."

"I know that my late employer met his death by violence," Antrim said feverishly. "If that is what you mean."

"That is what I mean," said Annerly patiently. "Come, Antrim, you are a man of sense and can help me if you will. Who was the murderer of Major Fairfax?"

"I heard Mrs. Fairfax tell you yesterday that if you would find the one who profited by her brother-in-law's death you would find his murderer," said Antrim, shortly.

"I can go her one better, Mr. Annerly, to use a common expression. When you have found the person who has schemed and toiled and struggled to be remembered in the gentleman's will, and failed, you will not have a great deal of trouble in finding the one whose hands are stained with his blood. And you can take this hint or leave it alone. The detective business is not much in my line, you know."

"Meaning—" hinted Annerly.

"Meaning Mrs. Fairfax, of course, who else? My attachment for Laura and her preference for me has been patent to the whole household for months, and the uncle and legal guardian of my affianced was considerate enough to at least offer no open objections to our union. Yet before he is cold in the grave—"

"My dear fellow," urged Annerly,

"It sounds as though you were bringing charges of a criminal nature against Mrs. Fairfax," he said decidedly.

"Really, I wish that you would speak plainly, Mr. Antrim. Your employer, I presume, was not unkind to you in his way. You must feel that you've something to his memory."

"Somebody in the house had un-

Detective Pumps Young Foster on His Knowledge of the Strange Death of Major Fairfax.

that my fingers itched to wring his neck. She, however, did not venture a remonstrance.

"Indeed, I gathered from her manner and that of the others that she was quite accustomed to being treated in that way, but perhaps hardly in the presence of strangers. At any rate, she bent her face, which had suddenly grown scarlet, a little lower over her plate."

"You throw away money as if it was water," roared the major. "Let you take this senseless jaunt at my expense? I think I see myself doing it."

"He stooped a little so that he could see her face."

"I would as soon—"

"He stopped suddenly as if paralyzed. Too mortified by the occurrence, too ashamed for utterance, I looked up."

"His face had changed suddenly and inexplicably. His eyes were goggled; his jaws dropped foolishly. I looked from one to another of those about the table to see what had caused his discomfiture."

"Miss Foster's face, as I have said, was bent over her plate. Proud as she was, I think that she was crying a little. Her brother, sitting beside her, was scowling, and I saw his hands clench nervously. Jean was sobbing unrestrainedly out of sheer sympathy, and Laura was staring at her uncle quite as if he had been a wild beast of some kind."

"Mrs. Fairfax, pouring tea at the end of the table, had forgotten herself and allowed her cup, which she was refilling, to overflow."

A Perfect Terror of a Temper.

"She mopped up the liquid with her napkin without the slightest change of countenance. Two or three servants were in the room, I remember—Jefferson, who was standing behind his master, and Mrs. Edmunds, who had turned her back squarely on the scene and was engrossed with some glasses she was filling at the sideboard, and a maid who was bringing in hot muffins."

And then to my astonishment I heard Major Fairfax say meekly:

"I am sure I beg your pardon, Rosamond. I don't know what made me act so, dear. And of course you shall go. I hope that you shall have a very pleasant visit. You said next week, did you not? I will let you have an extra check for trills and gewgaws. You must not let your friend be ashamed of you."

"Rosamond gulped down something in her throat and stammered out some words that passed for thanks, and the meal went on. But the incident set me to wondering."

Annerly interrupted him.

"He may have been shamed by the sight of her tears," he said. "A choleric temperament—"

"He may have been, but he wasn't," said Antrim shortly. "I tell you, Mr. Annerly, something set the brakes on his temper so suddenly that it almost upset him. And I swear that no one in the room save the one who was answerable was any wiser than I. And it was all done without a word, mind you."

"That set me to watching the man who called himself my employer, and almost every day something of the kind would occur. He seemed to have a grudge of some kind against Jean, possibly because she feared him so. One evening I remember I was sitting in the library and he was dictating a letter to me when she came in for a book. It was early in the evening and the others were on the veranda. She looked a little startled—I am sure that she had expected that at that hour she would find the room empty—but she walked quietly to one of the shelves and took a book from it."

"He frowned as she passed him. I suppose that her shyness and her fear of him made her a little awkward. At any rate, she stumbled over something and the book fell with a little crash to the floor."

"He sprang up, and so did I, for the moment almost thought that he meant to strike her, and he began to berate her so savagely that the poor child hardly knew which way to turn. I think that her evident terror only enraged him the more, and I do not know how the scene would have terminated had not something happened."

"I was standing facing him with my back to the door when I heard a chair pushed back on the veranda and a little later the rustle of skirts as some one passed through the hall."

Ruled With a Rod of Iron.

"The expression of Major Fairfax's face changed instantly and was replaced by a look of extreme gentleness."

"Let me get your book for you, Jean," he said kindly. "You are not hurt. I hope. My dear, should you like to sit here in the library and read? You will not annoy me in the least."

"The poor child was beyond speech. She was crying silently."

"You mustn't be so afraid of me, child," he said with an evident effort. "See here is some money for—candy."

He handed her a gold piece, for I saw the gleam of it in the lamplight. "And Jean, you are fond of books, are you not? Tell Rosy to make out a list of them for you tonight and I will have them sent out from town. No histories, mind you, or lesson-books, nothing so stupid. Only story-books, oh, Jean?"

"This time she was able to control her voice a little. "Thank you, sir," she faltered, and slipped out of the room."

(Continued Next Sunday.)

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